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## Introduction to This Issue

# In Thanksgiving for Gordon J. Straw: The Weaving Continues

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**R**obin Wall Kimmerer, enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, opens her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* with an invitation to join in creating a braid:

Will you hold the end of the bundle while I braid?  
Hands joined by grass, can we bend our heads together  
and make a braid to honor the earth? And then I'll hold  
it for you, while you braid, too.

I could hand you a braid of sweetgrass, as thick and shining as the plait that hung down my grandmother's back. But it is not mine to give or yours to take. *Wiingaaashk* belongs to herself. So I offer, in its place, a braid of stories meant to heal our relationship with the world. This braid is woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and the story of an Anishinabek scientist trying to bring them in service to what matters most.<sup>1</sup>

Gordon J. Straw taught us a great deal about “braiding,” or as he put it in his inaugural address, “weaving.” He brought the powerful legacy of his identity as a member of the Brothertown Indian Nation to his work as a theologian who was also deeply shaped by the Lutheran heritage; to his ministries as pastor and denominational leader; to his role as spiritual guide and friend to so many parishioners, students, and colleagues; and to his special place in a web of loving family and friends.

The Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago (LSTC) rejoiced when, after many years of ministry as an organizer, pastor, denominational leader and administrator, graduate student, and auxiliary professor, Gordon Straw was elected to hold the Floyd and Paul Cornelsen Chair of Spiritual Formation at LSTC. It was, he said, his “dream job,” and he exercised his ministry with such vibrant joy, until death cut his ministry all too short, that his contributions to life together continue to reverberate within us and among us.

Thus, in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*, several colleagues and friends have joined Gordon's work of weaving. In the essays that follow, readers will be offered glimpses of how the

authors of this issue, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, earnestly reflect on the commitments Gordon held dear: his Native heritage and the challenges it poses to western theology; his call to face honestly and courageously the devastation to the earth and to indigenous, enslaved, and marginalized peoples that U.S. Christians have perpetuated; his dedication to the “priesthood of all believers” and the vital role of spiritual formation in theological education. It is the collective hope of all who have joined in this labor of love that Gordon's legacy live long and prosper among us and continue in the ministries and commitments of the students he loved.

In “Gordon Jon Straw: Relationships Are Everything,” **Evelyn and Amanda Straw** describe the relationships that constituted Gordon's life: his relationship with the God who called him to ministry in a variety of contexts, with his Native heritage and the lifegiving traditions fostered by this heritage, with his beloved family and friends, and with the students he taught and mentored as well as the colleagues he valued.

The second essay of this issue is **Gordon J. Straw's** inaugural address, “Native Thought, Suffering, and Spiritual Formation as Theological Education,” positioned here so that readers may see how Gordon attempted to “weave” important strands of thought together. He identified these strands as “Seeing the universe as living and personal, rather than mechanical and objective; challenges to theological education which largely come from seeing the universe as mechanical and objective; and finally, spiritual formation as theological education.”<sup>2</sup>

In “Twenty Years On: The Once and Future Theology of Native Americans,” **Steven Charleston** returns to predictions he made twenty years ago published in a chapter titled “From Medicine Man to Marx.” It was a call for traditional Native American economic theory to be articulated as clearly as Native American spirituality. The author examines the accuracy of his projections based on contemporary developments, summarizes the current position of Native American theology, and then charts the salient economic and spiritual trends twenty years into the future.

In “Calling a Thing What It Is: Confronting the American Genocide of Indigenous Peoples,” **Craig Nesson** examines the history of indigenous people through the lens of genocide theory. Following autobiographical reflections on settler colonialism

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1. Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), ix–x. *Wiingaaashk* is Kimmerer's indigenous word for sweetgrass, whose “scientific name is *Hierochloe odorata*, meaning the fragrant, holy grass” (ix).

2. Gordon Straw, “Native Thought” in this issue, page 10.

and the practice of holding seminars on the theme of American genocides, Nesson explores the meaning of right remembering and making reparations in the context of American exceptionalism and white supremacy as represented in civil religion. Calling a thing what it is, according to Luther's theology of the cross, involves not only righting the historical narrative based on the past but appreciating the resistance and resilience of indigenous people into the present. Nesson pays tribute to Gordon J. Straw, whose resistance and resilience in the face of atrocities committed against indigenous tribes in the U.S. challenges us to the commitment of calling a thing what it is.

**José David Rodríguez** focuses his essay on images and their power to arouse emotions leading to specific actions. He argues that in our present U.S. socio-political discussions about migration policy, images can lead to actions of fear and xenophobia-dislike or prejudice against people from other countries. Images from the Bible, however, whether visual or not, usually lead to xenophilia—the love for those who are strangers, aliens, and foreign sojourners. The development of a Christian Migration Theology challenges the perennial temptation of xenophobia with xenophilia. Why? Because those whom we usually find very difficult to love are in their powerlessness and vulnerability the sacramental presence of Christ. Rodríguez dedicates this article to “our colleague Gordon Straw who understood the Christian calling for xenophilia and practiced it in his ministry and teaching, and all those who continue to follow his example.”

Remembering Gordon's commitments to creation, deeply shaped by his heritage as a member of the Brothertown Indian Nation, two LSTC biblical scholars make connections with the biblical heritage. In “The Earth and the Earthling,” **Klaus-Peter Adam** makes connections between the deep love of the earth that characterizes the cosmology of the Jahwist's narrative of the earth and of the earthling's fall. Genesis 2–3 depicts the ideal state of humankind as time in a well-kept garden and does so from the vantage point of a paradise lost. Adam suggests that his story offers an inspiring vantage point that may be seen in relation to Native American traditions and their understanding of humankind. The Jahwist refers to the first human as a being made out of clay, conceiving of the ideal-typical humankind semantically and ontologically as an “earthling,” using the Hebrew term ‘*adam*, a cognate of “earth” (*‘adamah*). While grammatically masculine, this being is at the outset not gendered and receives a full gender-identity as male only after the fall in the curse (3:17–19). The Jahwist's story about the first humans in the garden offers a perspective on the life of humankind in the garden as the ideal-typical couple of a not fully gendered “earthling” made of clay and the “woman” as “helper.” This essay focuses on Yahweh's tender compassion for the humans in the roles of a potter and a gardener in the garden, and still after the fall (I); the fragile nature of the state of affairs in the garden (II); and finally reflects on the hierarchical, fully gendered world order after the fall, as the curses in Gen 3:14–19 describe it (III).

Remembering Gordon's passionate care for the earth, **Barbara R. Rossing** describes how in Revelation and other apocalyptic

texts, waters are personified by their angels or messengers who communicate with God—somewhat similar to indigenous understandings of cosmology and spirits. We can listen for apocalyptic calls for discernment of spirits, including the spirits of living ecosystems. The Bible's prophetic critique of economic systems that pollute waters and make water unaffordable can help us address watershed justice issues today. In Revelation the rivers and fresh waters cry out, bringing a lawsuit on their behalf and on behalf of peoples against oppressive empires and corporate polluters.

Taking as a point of departure a conversation with Gordon Straw, **Nathan C.P. Frambach** (“Letting Be the Mystery: Storied Lives”) contends that human beings re-inhabit our lived experiences—the happening truth of an experience—by remembering; through the power of story. Frambach draws on the work of Catherine Keller, John Caputo, and Barry Lopez to suggest a theo-poetical approach to remembering and interpreting lived experience. Human beings employ a complex constellation of stories and songs, poems and artistry, memories and prayers to give voice to and seek meaning in the wide array of particular experiences in which we detect mystery, in which we hear and seek to discern God's call and what is being called for. The pastoral, poetic, and prophetic can be held together in a theologically informed approach to life in community, to a lived faith, to an openness to hearing and heeding a call from God that is often unbidden but not unwelcome.

In remembrance and celebration of Gordon's leadership in spiritual formation, **Mark N. Swanson** offers “Beyond Imitation? Paul of Sadamant (fl. 1260 CE) on ‘the best of works.’” He identifies a perennial problem in the life of Christian discipleship and formation: how to work out the relationship between the life of active engagement with the world on the one hand, and the life of contemplation and prayer on the other. Swanson provides a previously untranslated text from the Arabic-language heritage of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt. Written by Peter of Sadamant, a pastor and scholar who flourished around the year 1260 CE, it features a conversation between a teacher (or “spiritual director”) and a disciple about “the best of works”—a title to which *both* active works of mercy *and* intimate prayer with God have claim. Perhaps Peter has something to teach *us*, if we attend carefully and exegete imaginatively. The translation is made from a volume recently published in Egypt: Bishop Epiphanius of the Monastery of St. Macarius, ed., *Instructive Lives, by Fr. Peter of Sadamant* (Cairo: *St. Mark Magazine Publishing House*, 2016), 27–29.

In his powerful sermon, “Sage Against the Machine,” preached at Gordon Straw's memorial service, **Daniel Ruen** bore eloquent witness to ways that Gordon lived his life and faced his death. Although passionately opposed to the “machines” that damage and destroy indigenous and other vulnerable peoples as well as the earth itself, Gordon's life was not characterized by “rage against the machine” but by “sage against the machine”: public actions and life-giving rituals, like the use of sage in Native rituals of protection and healing, that aim to bring comfort, healing, and strength

to every struggle for justice, and to foster trust in the grace and power of God to bring forth new life, even in death. We are deeply grateful to Pastor Ruen for permission to publish this sermon as the final contribution to a range of essays that all seek to honor and carry on some of the theological themes and commitments dear to Gordon Jon Straw, an extraordinary theologian, pastor, and colleague.

The creation of this issue evoked these words from Stephanie Paulsell:

Writing is too difficult, and too potentially transformative, for us to write out of motives other than love and generosity. This does not mean that we should not write critically, or polemically, or prophetically. But it means we should write in a way that betrays what we care about, a way that betrays our love... The very best writing emerges from generosity, the desire to meet and nourish another. No matter how inadequate our words may seem to us, in our struggle to find the right ones, we make room for others to find words of their own.<sup>3</sup>

This issue's "Listening to Immigrant Voices" selection is a litany from the Church World Service Immigration and Refugee

Program, authored by **Joan M. Maruskin** and titled "Welcoming the Strangers—Refugees, Migrants, Asylum Seekers." The "Focus" selection is by Daniel R. Grainger, titled "Too Brittle to Break: Theological Imaginings on the Body of Christ." It offers a personal reflection encouraged by the art of poetry in which the author offers a collection of blessings to reflect on the body of Christ in ways that wrestle with the intricacies of faith and life together. "Preaching Helps" turns to the lectionary of Year A and offers sermon thoughts and ideas for the weekends from January through March 2020.

In addition to the labor of love to which the essays in this issue bear witness, several members of the faculties of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and Wartburg Theological Seminary gave generous financial contributions to support the costs of this issue. The staff of *Currents* joins in giving thanks for all the generosity this issue holds and the generosity of spirit to which it bears witness.

*Kathleen D. Billman*

*John H. Tietjen Professor of Pastoral Theology*

*Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago*

*Issue Editor*

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3. Stephanie Paulsell, "Writing as a Spiritual Discipline," in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephanie Paulsell (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 30–31.

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